

Suburban Journals, Jefferson County Journal

By: Kevin Kidd, Jefferson County Journal

Many concerned citizens have a better understanding of the dangers of methamphetamine after attending the meth summit hosted by Congressman Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, Sunday at Fox High School.

Scully Gaines of Arnold attended the summit after hearing about Jefferson County's national notoriety for producing large amounts of the drug.

"I had heard we were number one in the country for meth labs and that concerns me," she said. "I wanted to get more information and see if I could help."

"More and more we're becoming known as the leader in meth production and that's got to change," Carnahan said.

The assistance of Gaines and fellow county residents is vital to stopping meth production, law enforcement officials said.

Officers with the Jefferson County Municipal Enforcement Group (JCMEG) told residents about signs that may indicate a meth lab is close by, including camouflaged or painted tanks with modified valves, strong chemical odors and burn piles consisting of chemical containers and glassware.

JCMEG officers told those at Sunday's event to stay alert and know their neighbors. They said half of the group's meth lab seizures last year were due to tips from local residents.

Carnahan spoke about recent legislation aimed at squashing the region's meth epidemic he has co-sponsored. The Clean-up Meth Act will provide funds to schools and clinics for prevention and treatment, as well as providing assistance to farms and parks that have been polluted by meth labs, he said.

Law enforcement officers throughout the county performed 258 meth lab seizures and 353 meth-related arrests last year. Neighboring St. Louis County recorded 103 arrests and 82 seizures, while St. Louis City had 17 arrests and 19 seizures.

The problem is unquestionably difficult to solve for local authorities.

"It's easy to make, it's cheap to produce and it's highly addictive," Prosecutor Robert Wilkins said of the drug.

The rural landscape of Jefferson County makes it easier to produce the drug here than in more urban areas, he said. Wilkins said the majority of seizures and arrests take place along the Highway 30 corridor, which is predominantly unincorporated.

Wilkins discussed a major problem in the battle against meth producers and users – a backlog of cases waiting to be processed at the St. Louis County lab where suspected meth samples from Jefferson County are processed. Wilkins said it can take as long as 10 months for results from a seizure to be processed.

"We can't prosecute a case, can't file a charge until we get those results," Wilkins said. "It's a dangerous situation and my fear is it's only going to get worse before it gets better."

Jefferson County Sheriff Oliver "Glenn" Boyer said the fight against meth is putting a strain on county resources.

"Those resources have to come from somewhere," Boyer said. "It all continues to snowball to the point where we look at Congressman Carnahan and our local legislators and say 'Hey guys, we need some help.'"